

Digging Test Pits in a Local Community

Malcolm and Frances Billinge January 2016

Frances and Malcolm Billinge talked about the test pits they had been digging in Bovey Tracey and highlighted some of the issues to be considered in setting up a new project.

In recent years Frances has been researching the history of Bovey Tracey and they thought it would be interesting to see if they could unearth pottery through the ages to complement these studies. They have by now dug test-pits in 25 local gardens and many of the sherds were on show and below is a list of their slides and presentation.

Tithe Map In 1260 in the reign of King Henry 3rd Henry de Tracy, lord of the manor, obtained borough status for Bovey Tracey and the 1841 Tithe map shows the burgage plots stretching back from the roads within the borough. There were approximately 40 households in the 13th century.

Church The parish church of St Peter, St Paul and St Thomas of Canterbury lies just outside the borough and its dedication reminds us of the involvement of Sir William de Tracy in the murder of Thomas a Becket in 1170. There is plenty of history in every town and village.

Cromwell's Arch Another famous name associated with the town is Oliver Cromwell and this arch on Priory Street is named after him. Now, despite resistant local legend there is no documentary evidence for a priory in town but Cromwell's Parliamentary forces did however visit Bovey Tracey in 1646 and routed Royalist troops encamped on Bovey Heath. Yet more history but good geology as well!

B.T. Pottery The Heath is famous for its ball clay which was used in the potteries in Bovey Tracey that began in the mid-18th century and continued up until 1957. So what can we find out about B.T. from digging test pits in local residents back gardens?

North Hall At a previous meeting Peter Rennells and Andy Crabb both talked about North Hall in Widecombe. That's where we met archaeologist Dr Imogen Wood.

Imogen We started by organising a community day at the library.



"Digging a test-pit"

Test Pit 1 Test pitting involves us asking home owners if we can spend two or three hours digging a hole in their gardens in order to unearth discarded pottery which we then wash and identify.

Test Pit 2 It is important to be careful in the garden and to avoid mud in the house.

Test Pit 3 More tips on digging test-pits.

Saxon hoard There is a need to agree who keeps the pottery and how to deal with any valuable finds.

Carolina Naturally, having washed and identified the pottery, we go back to show the home-owners the finds from their gardens. Pottery sherds need to be identified, marked, recorded and then stored.

So, what have we found?

Upper Greensand-derived pottery No prehistoric, Roman or Saxon pottery but four sherds of 11-13th century UGS-D from the Blackdown Hills which is found in excavations across South Devon including up on Dartmoor at the Houndtor 2 and Hutholes medieval settlement sites. Found at North Hall, Widecombe. You will see from the photo that it is thin, handmade, undecorated and unglazed. These sherds would probably have come from cooking pots used by some of the very earliest Bovey residents. Hard to spot when covered in mud!

Pack horse It is amazing to realise that all this early pottery was transported by pack horse and presumably there was a brisk sale of such domestic necessities at the town fairs and markets that were allowed once Bovey gained borough status.

Totnes-type pottery But given the transport issue it is not surprising that Totnes-type ware captured the south and west Devon markets from the 14th century. Again we find thin, hand-made, undecorated and unglazed cooking pots. It was found at Houndtor 1 and also at North Hall. It is the predominant medieval pottery in use locally and it was continued to be made until the 17th-18th centuries.

Foreign Imports Single sherds of 13th /14th century Saintonge (as at North Hall), 16th century Beauvais and 17th century Portuguese faience.

Saintonge Jug Our earliest foreign import is the single sherd of Saintonge green-glazed ware from a jug. This is generally considered to indicate high status dwelling but recent finds suggest lower status use as well. Either way, a close association with the wine trade.

German stonewares Included in this picture are our sherds of Raeren, Frechen and Westerwald stonewares. This pottery is found at North Hall.

Westerwald stoneware An internet picture of an attractive Westerwald vessel.

Frechen Bellarmines Three Frechen Bellarmine jars.

Frechen drinking vessel However I would like you to look at this plain Frechen drinking vessel and then compare it with ...

Liverton cup This was brought to us by a local family whose son unearthed it whilst building a skate board jump. We showed it to John Allan who immediately recognized it as a late 16th century Totnes-type ware copy of a Frechen drinking vessel and it is a unique form.



"Liverton cup"



"Happy Residents"

Our N. Devon and S. Somerset pottery We see a marked change in the 17th and 18th centuries when local pottery use switched to both the North Devon and South Somerset products and you will see from the pottery that we have brought in, that these two new sources involved a far wider range of vessel type, form and decoration including sgraffito. These two types of pottery have been found in almost every garden we have visited and there are almost no other regional imports.

Two sorting tasks for the audience involving N. Somerset and S. Somerset pottery as well as a mixture of typical test-pit finds such as glass, flower-pots, metalwork, bones and miscellaneous items.

N. Devon internet picture N. Devon medieval coarseware which was produced earlier than this fineware jug was found at Dinna Clerks and also at North Hall. But little from Bovey or further south into south Devon.

S. Somerset internet picture A S. Somerset jug. S. Somerset pottery was found at North Hall.

Clay Pipes As well as pottery sherds, you will not be surprised to hear that we regularly come across clay pipe bowls and stems and most of these date to a few decades either side of 1700. Some were made in Newton Abbot by Chapple Co.

Local pottery selection Bovey Potteries operated from the 1750s to 1957 and we still have Jeremy Leach potting on the edge of town. Although we are less interested in modern pottery we inevitably collect a fair amount and here is a selection.

Muffle kilns and House of Marbles If you want to know more about this modern pottery we can recommend the museum at the House of Marbles that is curated by Brian Adams - that's if you don't get waylaid by the gift shop and coffee bar.